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The Love
Haters

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ORION

IT WAS QUITTING time on a Friday, but Cole Hutcheson didn't care.

Nobody cared too much right then, in fact. Because we were all about to get laid off.

Or, too many of us were, anyway.

That's when Cole showed up at my cubby, perched on the edge of my desk, and asked if I wanted to spend a few weeks in Key West filming a video about a US Coast Guard rescue swimmer.

My answer, of course, was, "Sure."

Did I know what a rescue swimmer was? Could I locate Key West on a map? Could I tell you anything about the US Coast Guard—other than it had something to do with *guarding the coast*? Did I even like the ocean?

All no.

But it didn't matter.

That's how it was in this business: the cutthroat world of mid-level video production.

That's also how it was when the company director—a tall lady with tall shoes who we all just called "Sullivan"—was planning to lay off a

third of the department over the next month. Most likely the newest employees. Which included me.

She sent an email about it, of all things. An email so full of jargon about *rightsizing* and *rebalancing* and *adjusting to levels of demand* that I had no real idea what it said.

I skimmed it, honestly. And went back to work. For a few minutes.

Until the stampede of office-wide panic.

I would have said yes to the Coast Guard project, anyway. But I guess Sullivan's email made me say yes *faster*.

As soon as I agreed, Cole—my work superior—gave me all the details. Rapid-fire, in our now mostly vacated office. It was fine. He was doing me a favor. This was the kind of assignment that could demonstrate my value.

As of today, I needed to get on that.

I grabbed a notebook to jot down the important stuff.

"It's a Coast Guard air station in Key West," Cole said.

"Shouldn't it be a *water* station?" I said, half joking.

Cole ignored me. "It's to shoot a recruiting video. They want to film a rescue swimmer on a helicopter—"

"A swimmer *on a helicopter*?" I interrupted.

Now Cole squinted at me like he couldn't decide if I was serious.

Then, he made a decision. "Right," he said, and started to stand up. "Maybe this isn't for you."

"Wait!" I said, holding out my hands like *Stay* until he eased back down.

But Cole was studying me. "Do you know *anything* about the Coast Guard? At all?"

The stakes of the situation were not low. If I could've pulled off a lie, I'd have lied. "Not really," I said.

"You're not gonna be right for this," Cole said, with a headshake.

"I am gonna be *perfect* for this," I countered. Bluffing, of course. "It's the fact that I don't know anything about the military that makes me the best choice."

Cole waited, crossing his arms over his chest to brace against whatever bullshit I was about to offer up.

"It's a promo, right?" I went on, thinking fast. "Which means our target audience will be people—*like me*—who know nothing. I can teach them as I'm learning! I'll have a fresh perspective. I'll see things others won't."

I wasn't even sure what the job was yet, honestly.

But whatever it was, I needed it.

More accurately: I needed to *not get fired*.

Cole sighed and then seemed to make the real-time decision to continue this conversation on a provisional basis. In a tone you'd use with a toddler, Cole said, "The Coast Guard flies helicopters out over the big ocean so their swimmers can rescue people out of the dangerous water."

A new visual came to my mind. I had definitely seen images of rescue guys jumping out of helicopters into the ocean. "That's the Coast Guard?" I asked. "The guys in the flippers?"

Cole blinked so slowly it read as sarcastic. "Yes. But don't call them flippers."

I tried to think of another word for flippers.

"They're *fins*," Cole said. Then another headshake. "This should go to someone else."

"No, no!" I said. "I've got this."

"If I hear the word *flippers* again, you're out." Then he added, "I almost gave this to Jaden."

Cole gave most things to Jaden, who had been here two months longer than me. "Why didn't you?"

Cole shrugged. "He can't swim."

Okay, don't tell anybody: *I also couldn't swim*.

"Not swimming is a deal breaker?" I asked.

"I mean, yeah," Cole said. "Half this job will happen in the water."

"In the water?"

"In it, over it, near it."

"Not *under* it, though, right? It's not, like, a scuba-diving deal?"

Cole thought for a second. "No. These guys are swimmers, not divers."

"So *on* the water—not *in* the water."

"Unless things go horribly wrong."

I shouldn't have asked. But I did. "*Horribly wrong?*"

Cole shrugged. "The helicopter could go down in the ocean."

"Does that happen?"

"It *can* happen. It has happened."

Oh, god. I took a breath.

"And if it does happen," Cole went on, "you need to know how to swim. Because helicopters flip upside down as soon as they hit the surface."

Maybe he *should* give this to someone else.

But I nodded, all cool, like *Sure*. Then, I asked, in a *Remind me again* tone: "Why do they flip upside down?"

Cole blinked. Clearly, he thought everyone already knew this. "You know those big spinny blades up top?"

I gave him a look. "Yes."

"Just below them is the engine."

I nodded, like, *Huh*.

"So helicopters are top-heavy," he continued.

"So they just—roll belly-up?" I asked.

"Only if they crash."

"But they don't crash, right?"

Cole shrugged. "Sometimes they do. When it happens, it happens. The crew has to train for it. They have to get strapped into a simulator . . . and then practice getting out. And whoever we send for this project has to do that training, too."

Wait—what?

"I'm sorry," I said. "Whoever's doing this video has to get *flipped upside down inside a helicopter underwater?*"

"In a simulator," Cole said. "Insurance requires it."

I shifted to a poker face. "Cool."

I decided not to ask any more questions.

"Anyway," Cole went on, refocusing. "Just making sure you're fine with water."

"Yes." I nodded definitively. That wasn't a lie, right? I mean, who isn't *fine with water?*

"Great," Cole said. "Because I'm trying to help you out here."

He was? "You are?"

"Yes," he said, impatient. "Jaden's out, but I could've gone with Dylan. Or Arjun. Or Mila." Other recent hires who were now also on the chopping block.

"Why me, then?" I asked, surprised I was on his radar.

"Because Sullivan's about to lay off fifty percent of the company."

"Fifty?" I said. "I heard it was thirty-three."

"It's fifty. It's going to be a bloodbath. She's restructuring everything. She's hired consultants. You heard about her divorce, right?"

I nodded.

"Did you hear he cheated on her with his Pilates instructor?"

Oof. That was rough. I shook my head.

"And he did some kind of sneaky shit with the lawyers where he walked away with most of their money."

Now I frowned protectively for Sullivan. Who I had never talked to.

"That's what I'm saying. She's got some rage to burn. And she's channeling every ounce of it into turning this company into a profit machine. And that means getting rid of people like you."

"People like me?"

"But I want you to stay. Because if she fires all the talented people, that makes my life harder. And I don't need my life to be any harder."

"You think I'm one of the talented people?"

"I do." Cole shrugged.

This was news to me. "Since when?"

"Since the other night. When you told me about your dreams."

Oh, god. Had I done that?

I thought back. We'd had a company dinner. I might have had a little too much to drink. Cole and I were the last two people in the

rideshare heading home, and okay, to be honest . . . I might have gotten a little weepy about my long list of recent disappointments. And—ugh, yes—possibly overshared a few things.

Dammit, Katie! I scolded. *Don't tell people about your dreams!*

"Sorry about that," I said, wincing.

"It was strangely endearing," Cole said. "I normally don't notice junior employees too much. How long have you been here? Six months?"

I wasn't *that* junior. "Twelve."

He nodded. "The tears got my attention. You also told me about getting jilted—and I've been jilted myself."

Was he sharing? Did he want me to commiserate? Were we about to bond?

But then he went on. "You just seemed so . . . what's a nicer word for *pathetic*?"

"Pitiable?" I offered.

"Exactly. Pitiable. Do you remember when you blew your nose straight into your blouse like a Kleenex?"

I did now.

"You also told me about the videos you've done for your 'Day in the Life' project," Cole went on. "And I went home and watched one. And it was surprisingly good."

This conversation was like a Ping-Pong game. "It was?"

"Your cinematography is strong. Your camera angles are unexpected. And you get fantastic emotion out of your interviewees."

That *was* a specialty of mine, for better or worse: making people cry.

I didn't realize how good that encouragement would feel until it was happening. Cole might be overly confident, and a smidge narcissistic, and not exactly my favorite person in the office. But he was good at his job.

And when a person who's good at something says that you are also good at that same thing . . . it's nice. No matter how much trouble Cole Hutcheson was about to cause me, I have to admit that him flat-out acknowledging my professional strengths like that was inspiring.

Because I really had been jilted.

And I really did love my work.

And I really did not want to get fired.

"That's why you're helping me?" I asked.

Cole counted off on his fingers. "I'm helping you because: One, now I've seen your stuff, and it's good. Two, if you get fired, that makes my life harder. And three: this job fits your topic."

My topic.

Oh, god. Had I told him about that, too?

I worked at this corporate video company on the weekdays. You know what corporate videos are, right? They're like if a TV commercial and a documentary had a baby—but the TV commercial had all the dominant genes. Hallmarks of corporate videos include branding, marketing, and client pleasing. Plus, lots of upbeat, royalty-free music.

Nothing wrong with that.

It was a fun job in a nice building with pleasant colleagues. I had health insurance and a paycheck—at least for now. No complaints.

But. The thing about doing creative work for hire is that you're not exactly following your own vision. You're following your vision of what you think somebody else's vision is.

Which isn't the same thing.

So, on the weekends, I did my own thing.

A passion project.

I made charming little six-minute mini-documentaries for my fledgling YouTube channel.

And the mini-documentaries were about . . . heroes.

That was my topic.

I profiled people who had pulled children out of burning cars, or intercepted robberies, or plunged headfirst into riptides. I filmed them at their homes morning, noon, and night and got them to tell me the story of the heroic thing they'd done—and why, and how, and if it had changed them, and what it meant.

A “Day in the Life.” That’s all. A little portrait of an ordinary person who had once decided to do an extraordinary thing.

The idea had come to me at a time when I was feeling, shall we say, just *so disappointed in humanity*. A time when I really needed to hear stories like that: of kindness and heroism and sacrifice. Of people doing *good*.

It worked this way: I spent exactly twenty-four hours with each subject, filming every aspect of that one day—from drinking coffee in the morning, to putting on socks, to feeding the cat, to driving to work. All that was B-roll, which is videographer-speak for filler images, except I didn’t use it as filler. I used it as the whole framework. While I was there, I interviewed the subjects to get the story of the heroic thing they’d done, from start to finish, in great detail. That’s an art: Asking the right questions. Getting the real story about what it was like—really like—to be a hero.

I filmed the interviews, but then I just used the voices. Heroic people telling their own stories for six minutes—with lots and lots of B-roll flashing by on the screen to keep it interesting.

I’ll just say it. The videos were cool.

Unnoticed, but cool.

Here’s a twist. So far, I’d only featured women. Not for feminist reasons, exactly—but because I truly spent a full-circle day with these folks, even sleeping at their houses. They had to agree to that up front in the contract. One full day of me filming *everything*. You could get impossibly amazing shots that way: people blow-drying their hair in slo-mo, or doing morning sit-ups at sunrise, or the steam rising off that first cup of coffee. Not to mention pasta noodles twining on forks, phone calls with sick parents, cuddles with pets. Sighs, frowns, laughs. Tears.

Personal things. True things.

The fact was, I just wasn’t going to ask some random man out of nowhere if I could sleep over at his place alone.

Not even a hero.

Maybe I’d add some men to the series when I was rich and successful and could bring a crew with me. Or a bodyguard. But until then, it was ladies only.

But next, Cole said, “That’s why I’m giving you this. The guy we’re profiling for this promo is a bona fide hero. So you should go to Florida and make the official video—but, while you’re there, do a ‘Day in the Life’ with him on the side.”

Ah. What was it I just said about saying yes and figuring it out later?

Okay, fine. This guy *being a guy* was problematic. But I’d seen enough opportunities come and go to keep that to myself.

“What kind of hero is he?” I asked.

“You definitely saw it on the news. It was everywhere a few years back. He saved a golden retriever that fell off a cliff.”

I sat up. “Jennifer Aniston’s dog?”

“Yeah.”

“I know that video,” I said. “That video was everywhere!”

“Right? I know. It would have been everywhere anyway because the footage was so dramatic—”

I was nodding now. “He got lowered down to the beach on that wire, and then he climbed all the way back up to that tiny ledge—”

“A hundred feet—”

“And the dog was in so much pain, it was snapping—”

“And he hummed the song ‘Heart and Soul’ over and over until it felt safe.”

I nodded. As heroes went, this one was pretty top-notch. “Remember that little paw he splinted?” I said.

Cole nodded. “And then he put the dog in a rescue basket, and climbed in with him, and did the hoist.”

Guess Cole had seen it a few times, too.

“What was his name again?” I asked, like it was on the tip of my memory.

“The media nicknamed him Puppy Love.”

“Tom something,” I said, thinking.